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Teachers' Professional Development at VET

Reflections on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

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Published in:

Trends in vocational education and training research, Vol. III.

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):

[10.5281/zenodo.3997331](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3997331)

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Publication date:

2020

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Andreasen, K. E., & Duch, H. S. (2020). Teachers' Professional Development at VET: Reflections on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) . In C. Nägele, B. E. Stalder, & N. Kersh (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research, Vol. III.: Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (Vol. 3, pp. 11-18)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3997331>

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Teachers' Professional Development at VET – Reflections on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

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Abstract

Recent decades teachers at Danish vocational colleges have been met with high demands in adapting their pedagogy and practice to meet the requirements of new legislation, which imply implementation of new pedagogical ideas as well as new ways of teaching and cooperating with colleagues. But teachers often find themselves lacking the necessary time to reflect on how to implement the new ideas and requirements. This condition thus represents a challenge to the success of implementing the demanded changes. In this article, we address the question of what is needed to create environments to support teachers' reflection and their professional development in VET with a specific focus at the potentials of 'professional learning communities' (PLC's).

Keywords

vocational education; professional development; teachers; communities of practice; professional learning communities (plc's)

1 Introduction

As described by educational researcher and theorist Andy Hargreaves, communication, dialogue, and reflection are some of the key factors in teachers' professional development and therefore also play an important role in school improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Recent decades have been characterized by constant and extensive demands for changes in VET education in most European countries (e.g. Cedefop, 2019). In particular, the situation in Danish VET has been characterized by reforms requiring teachers to change their teaching and pedagogy, as well as their understanding of the students and the academic content (Regeringen et al., 2018; Regeringen, 2014). Teachers in Danish VET are met with high demands in adapting their pedagogy and practice to meet the requirements of such new legislation, new pedagogical ideas, and new ways of teaching and cooperating with colleagues. However, the everyday life of teachers in Danish VET is also characterized by business and a lack of time; in other words, teachers are often not left much time to reflect on their practice or on how to implement the required changes (Duch & Andreasen, 2019). This condition thus represents a challenge to the success of implementing such changes.



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Hargreaves (1998) argues that forced change can have a negative impact on motivation (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Hargreaves, 1998). He points out that teaching is not only an intellectual or cognitive phenomenon but something that educators engage with and therefore respond to emotionally when they experience pressured working conditions and stressful conditions for realizing change requirements. This can cause demotivation and a loss of commitment and joy, which can occur if teachers are not given the necessary conditions for change (Hargreaves, 1998). It creates inefficiencies as well as poor conditions for skills development.

In this paper, we will address the research question: what is needed to create environments to support teachers' reflection and their professional development in VET?

The paper focuses on findings from a research project related to development work carried out in 2018–2019 at a Danish social and healthcare college. The aim of the development work in question was to support and create space for teachers' reflection, learning, and professional development. This was done by implementing activities based on the idea of professional learning communities (Albrechtsen, 2010; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Marzano et al., 2016; Wenger, 1999). Based on our experiences with the project, the paper discusses and analyses what characterizes a professional learning environment and what plays a role for professional development. Using empirical data from the project, we take a closer look at the challenges and contradictions that appear in such processes. The theoretical framework is inspired by Andy Hargreaves' discussions of professional learning environments and Wenger's theory about communities of practice (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017, 2018; Thompson et al., 2004; Wenger, 1999). It incorporates research data from the development project, which includes teaching observations and interviews with the participants.

2 Changes in the area of social and healthcare education

In recent decades, teachers at Danish social and healthcare colleges have been and continue to be in a situation where, for a variety of reasons, they have to change both their pedagogy and teaching as well as their understanding of the students and the education's academic content. The reason for this is a number of reforms in the vocational education sector that have been implemented in recent years due to political concern about a future shortage of skilled labour. One of these – passed in 2014 – thus aimed, among other things, to get more young people to choose a vocational education (Regeringen et al., 2014). The reform meant that the student cohort at social and healthcare colleges changed, with an increase in the number of young people coming directly from secondary school and starting a youth education programme. At the same time, more academically 'strong' students should be attracted to vocational education through new educational programmes. In 2018, the Danish government passed further initiatives aimed at motivating young people in secondary school to apply for vocational education (Regeringen et al., 2018).

The reforms mean that vocational colleges have simultaneously gained both a new student cohort in the form of academically strong students, but also younger students, some of whom would be considered academically weak. This creates a pressure on change at the social and healthcare colleges, which means that the educational programmes, and thus the teachers, must renew the pedagogy of the programme for these new groups of students.

In addition, vocational education programmes are undergoing changes as a result of changed working conditions for employees (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2013), and there have been savings on vocational education programmes in terms of government funding (Regeringen, 2018). These changes must also be assumed to be important in relation to the frameworks for teaching and thus teachers' pedagogy.

3 Professional learning communities

It is not new that teachers at vocational colleges are faced with demands for the development of their pedagogy. In addition to the ongoing reforms of vocational education programmes, historically there have always been various educational demands and measures that teachers have had to implement and qualify for, for example through pedagogical continuing education (Duch, 2017). Over time, there have also been different initiatives to support such development and change processes. A more recent example of this is reflected in the implementation of the idea of professional learning communities (PLCs) – a practice that has gained some prevalence in Denmark in recent years, especially in primary and lower secondary school (Albrechtsen, 2010).

PLC has its origins in theories developed in the 1990s about ‘the learning organisation’ as described, for example, by Peter Senge, and in system theories linking organizations and individuals (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Thomson et al., 2004), theory of learning processes and reflection (Albrechtsen, 2010), as well as in Andy Hargreave’s ideas about teacher and school development and what creates an innovative environment in schools, where precisely ‘professional learning communities’ are considered to be able to play an important role (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). The goal of PLC is to qualify teachers’ professional development and their implementation of changes, and, even though PLC is realized in different versions, it is based on a common idea that learning occurs through collaboration, de-privatization, and reflective dialogues based on shared values.

In the literature, there are various descriptions of PLC, where, for instance, the following themes are highlighted: “(1) shared and supportive leadership; (2) shared values and vision; (3) collective learning and its application; (4) shared personal practice; and (5) supportive conditions” (Wilson, 2016). As a practice, PLC can be described as: “A system of teacher teams which collaborate on issues related to teaching, assessment and other school-related topics that aim to improve the students’ learning” (Marzano et al., 2016, p. 9).

Such understandings are based on a view that learning is situated and takes place in communities of practice, as is also evident in Wenger’s theory (Wenger, 1999). The collaboration between teachers can provide long-lasting structures for professional development, and it can contribute to “a culture where teachers feel they have more control over their work” (Marzano et al., 2016, p. 18). For students, it is claimed that PLC contributes to better learning: “Research on a wide range of areas and over decades has shown, in brief, that effective PLCs can be linked to student results” (Marzano et al., 2016, p. 22). PLC thus seeks to build on empirical studies, experiences, and recommendations (Marzano et al., 2016). PLC can be closely linked to international experiences and results, experiences from Denmark, and in some contexts is associated with data and evidence (e.g. Dufour et al., 2016).

In various local interpretations, the idea of PLC has for a number of years been tested in Danish primary and lower secondary schools in the form of municipal initiatives, where entire teaching staffs participate in continuing education programmes on the idea and its application (Aarhus Kommune, 2017; VIA, 2017). There are a number of publicly available evaluations and presentations of preliminary results of this (EVA, 2017; VIVE, 2018). This shows, for example, that the schools studied who sought to implement the idea appear to be moving towards PLC, but without it being currently possible to measure the major changes for students’ learning and well-being (VIVE, 2018). Likewise, it appears that teachers experience a barrier to such change in terms of time to change practice through PLC (VIVE, 2018). It is the latter theme that we focus on in the analysis of this article.

However, while PLC can be found in Danish primary and lower secondary schools in various local forms, it is not yet well tested in the area of vocational education (Metropol, 2018). This action research project highlights the barriers and potentials that are reflected in processes of implementation of the idea at a Danish social and healthcare college.

In a Danish context, it is especially a description and understanding of PLC, like the one below, that has been dominant, and it is also this one that the action research is based on. This understanding, in continuation of the above account, describes PLC as being based on five core elements (also called ‘pillars’). This was introduced in Denmark by Albrechtsen (2010), and there are a number of Danish-language introductions that have slightly different emphases (Albrechtsen, 2016; Marzano, Heflebower, Hoegh, Warrick & Grift, 2016). What is common in these representations is the description of PLC with reference to the following five themes, called ‘pillars’:

1. shared values and visions
2. de-privatization of practice
3. cooperation
4. reflective dialogue
5. students’ and teachers’ learning

In the specific research at the social and healthcare college, the starting point is that PLC can support teachers’ learning in the many change processes mentioned above. In addition, there are local changes. Specifically, these relate to a new “common educational didactic basis” that is developed after a merger between several colleges, and in this process there has been an interest in and a need for the understanding and development of teaching differentiation and collegial cooperation, for example, in the form of supervision (Duch & Andreasen, 2019).

4 ‘Barriers’ and ‘resistance’ – theoretical background

The implementation of PLC initiates a change that requires and implies a learning process for all involved. However, it is well known that learning processes are complicated and can also be characterized by what some term resistance and barriers (e.g. Illeris, 2012). Various theorists have developed theories on how this can be understood and conceptualized.

We have chosen to incorporate the learning theorist Peter Jarvis’s theory, in which he deals with change understood as learning. Here, he thematizes the issue, which is linked to the fact that there can be varying degrees of difference and distances between, on the one hand, the change that is desired in a given culture, and, on the other hand, the expectations and needs for change that the individual sees or experiences (Jarvis, 2012). Jarvis talks about different forms of non-learning. If there is a large disagreement, there is a possibility that “they will receive an increased awareness regarding the potential learning situation but not feel able to learn anything from it” (Jarvis, 2012, p. 599). Or they “realize that they, for example, just do not have time for this learning” (Jarvis, 2012, p. 600).

Cognitive theories, as found with for instance Piaget (eg. Piaget, 1929), and other psychological theories can be understood in the light of how people act on the basis of internal and external disagreements and thus the need for change. In general, it can be described in the way that “in every human’s development and life, there are also obstacles and challenges that cannot easily be overcome and adapted to, but on the contrary inhibit development and the unfolding of life” (Illeris, 2012, p. 620). Thus, in a workplace where the individual encounters many different demands for changes, it is not a given that these demands will have an impact on teachers’ teaching, because there are external and internal disagreements. In this article, resistance is understood as expressions of, or something that is or can be, the result of such disagreements.

5 Methods

The project was designed as an action research project. The teachers and leaders participated with an interest in improving their pedagogy and trying to understand the problems and challenges of implementing pedagogical changes to their teaching (Dick, 2015; Wilson, 2016;

Rowell & Hong, 2017). Thus, it was designed to support their involvement and influence on the activities of the project (Brydon-Miller & Aragón, 2018). The research is inspired by ethnography, and the data are collected using qualitative methods. These included observations of the participating teachers when they were planning their teaching and activities in their teams as well as teachers when they were teaching in their classes in VET (Dick, 2015). During observations, field notes were taken. These were shared with the observed teachers, who commented on them, and the observations formed the basis of dialogues with the participating teachers about their interests and shared reflections on what was observed. Some of the teachers also used the field notes more specifically in relation to the improvement and development of their teaching. In observing teaching, the observer took a position without participation (full observer position), whereas in relation to meetings and joint planning, the position varied between full participation and full observer (Gold, 1958). During the 7 months of the research project, the observer regularly visited the college thereby gaining a broad knowledge of the college and its culture. Activities by the end of the course included focus group interviews, with the team divided into two groups with six participants in each, in order to discuss their experiences of the course's activities and the strengths and challenges of this in their professional development. In addition, three managers from the school were interviewed: a staff manager for the team, another manager at the same level, and a manager with a more senior management function (Barbour, 2007). The data from the research formed the basis of an analysis, and certain findings from this analysis led to further reflections that we particularly focus on in this article.

6 Change and resistance

Based on this article's focus, we see three key themes in the empirical data, which we present in three subsections.

6.1 Roles, relationships, and values in the teacher group

The first theme is about how teachers have roles and relationships in the group of colleagues they are in dialogue with in the project and which can give rise to collegial disagreements – disagreements that relate both to demands for change and to their differences in relation to what is important to them in teaching, which could be called values.

This becomes apparent in the meetings working with PLC, and the members spent part of the time working in smaller groups, where they conducted interviews according to a set model in order to achieve reflective dialogues (Madsen, 2010). The model gave the participants fixed roles, as well as making it clear that the individual teacher was the central player. From the beginning of the PLC process, each teacher had defined how they would work with change in the form of a specific theme, which was differentiation of teaching. Work was also carried out in smaller groups, the members of which varied from meeting to meeting because there were always some people absent, and not least because it was difficult to have fixed groups based on a single common task. This dynamic organization meant that in the reflective dialogues there was also negotiation about what was talked about and who had what role.

Based on different roles, participants thus contributed with reflections regarding the development of their specific practice. In some groups, however, participants preferred to talk about the challenges that were experienced in the broad sense in the workplace. As one teacher explained in an interview: "I brought up what is important to me. I experienced being understood and heard. I could see myself through the reflective team." (Focus group interview). For the teacher in question, it made sense to better understand the difference between colleagues and what it consisted of in order to be able to understand herself. Thereby, what might otherwise be seen as barriers to shared learning gained a new meaning. In the community of practice in the specific dialogue, practical solutions must be found in order to make the meeting work.

6.2 Disagreements among teachers about the potentials of PLC

Another theme is called disagreements among teachers in relation to what is experienced as possible. Six out of ten teachers at one of the meetings (PLC meeting in January 2019) said that PLC is only something that takes place at the PLC meetings. They explain that this is because they do not have “time”, that PLC is perceived as “too big”, that there are “a lot of other things”, and that they “cannot see the possibilities”. The four teachers who experience some integration of PLC into everyday life, but not to such an extent that they see PLC as a practice in everyday life, say that “something has happened in their teaching”. They describe how the PLC activities have made working with different kinds of observations and ‘data’ from their teaching more concrete for them. The work with PLC has meant that they have “prioritized”, and they have gained good experience from the project’s “interaction” with practice. They talk about feeling as if they have received a ‘push’ that has changed something. The participants suggest that the different degree of initial work with PLC in everyday life should be seen in connection with whether the researcher has observed the teacher’s teaching, since at first sight there appears to be such an effect.

As some teachers express it in a focus group interview, observation notes become “empirical evidence and experiences that are able to make processes visible”, “something that can be the subject of analysis” (Focus group interview). At the same time, there is a large attendance at the PLC meetings amongst participants, and they can remember their individual focus in relation to teaching differentiation. In this way, it can appear that there is a division in relation to the team’s participation in, experience with, and learning through the PLC course: Some see and experience possibilities for change, others to a lesser extent. In this way, the possibility for change is linked to these observations by the individual teacher, and resistance again has the character of being something external. Therefore, change appears as being linked to a few individuals rather than the teacher group as a whole.

6.3 Organizational framework

The last theme of the three that we will discuss is about the organizational framework. The organizational context in the form of the team structure, and thus the framework for learning through PLC, was formed before the project. Along the way, roles and tasks were negotiated at PLC meetings, and various types of products were worked on in relation to the development of teaching differentiation. In the community of practice, as mentioned above, a common opinion has formed that it is not possible to work with PLC in such a way that it changes teaching without changing organizational frameworks. The team appears to see a pattern in that if you have had an observer in your teaching, then PLC will start to have an impact. In this way, observations become a thing, an event, where notes from it can create learning and give meaning to PLC. If someone has not been part of this, the participants conclude that there has been less opportunity for change and learning. Overall, barriers are thus linked to external organizational frameworks as an explanation for changes being difficult. Such themes were elaborated on at one of the concluding focus group interviews of teachers, who talk about time, about having to prioritize between many tasks themselves as teachers, and PLC can therefore be seen as the leadership’s “management tool”, where the organizational demands are “checked off” (Focus group interview). Here, the merger that took place at this workplace is also explicitly mentioned, as well as a stream of new colleagues who were seen as slowing down development – again an experience of barriers caused by the organizational framework, which is used as a reason and explanation for the individual resistance.

7 Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical data revealed that the teachers needed environments that supported and allowed them more time and space for professional reflection with colleagues. Reflections take time and require that you do not feel under pressure in order to, for instance, prepare for the next lesson, make an important phone call, attend a meeting.

A very high degree of diversity was observed regarding the themes and issues the individual teachers raised and wished to discuss. Thus, designing a learning space that matched all participants' needs also required a high degree of influence and democracy (Rowell & Hong, 2017).

However, the analysis also showed that the activities carried out created a framework and space for development and learning in a professional community for the participants. The activities initiated formed a context that supported many types of reflections, which the observations also showed resulted in specific changes. For instance, it supported teachers' development of new understandings of the students and of their own teaching, which created or initiated changes in their educational practices. Thus, it supported processes of professional development. On the other hand, it also became clear that the teachers' experience of continuously being exposed to demands for change is not only in itself perceived as extremely demanding but can also cause emotional reactions and may become a barrier to changes and improvements. Such processes are important to address and can be prevented by ensuring that educators have the necessary space for reflections and for professional development to take place.

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